

Why the time has come for South African women to volunteer for planetary leadership...



Outgoing IEC Chair and Deputy Chair Dr. Brigalia Bam and Mrs. Thoko Mpumlwana participate in a candle-lighting ceremony to pass the baton between women leaders at an IDT/SAWID event on 28 March 2012, here with poet Naledi Chirwa. SAWID Photo

In rethinking women's contribution to a rapidly changing world, South African women are well-placed to plot a collaborative and grassroots revolution of women's leadership, articulating a women's charter with a few very clear demands.

By Marthe Muller

“This nation represents the best of the feminine efforts in the world to reform a whole nation... there are women leaders who are altruistic and who are looking for a new pattern for re-establishing a new society of family and communities.”¹ The month of August in South Africa commemorates a day of enormous collective feminine intention and impact, when, on 9 August 1956, more than 20 000 South African women marched to the Union Buildings, bastion of an oppressive apartheid system, to petition against proposed amendments to the Urban Areas Act of 1950, the pass laws that severely restricted the movement of Black African men and women in their own country.

Although this unjust system of pass laws was only formally repealed on November 13, 1986, the bundles of petitions with more than 100 00 signatures that were delivered by South African women outside the doors of then Prime Minister JG Strijdom on this day marked a significant moment in the collective legacy of South African women towards systems of human governance that are in greater alignment with the universal principles of equality, fairness and inalienable human rights.

South African women again find themselves at a crossroads where their collective intentions and efforts can set an example for the rest of the world.

The state of the world

More than twenty two years after the end of apartheid, it is clear to many that the world we inhabit is spiralling dangerously out of our conscious control in a way that severely compromises the human rights and quality of life of the majority of earth's more than 7.4 billion inhabitants.²

On 16 January 2015, a team of 18 researchers warned in the journal *Science* that four out of nine ‘planetary boundaries’³ necessary for human survival, namely climate change, loss of biosphere integrity, land-system change, and altered biogeochemical cycles (phosphorus and nitrogen), have already been crossed as a result of human activity.

The reigning global economic system, which is increasingly showing itself to be deeply unsustainable and flawed, with 24 nations already facing a debt crisis by 2015⁴, has further empowered the wealthiest 8 people in the world to amass as many assets as the combined wealth of the poorest 3.6 billion people⁵ and the economic cost of domestic violence worldwide now outnumbers the cost of all present wars by 9 to 1.⁶

The Global Peace Index, (GPI) produced annually by the Institute for Economics and Peace, with offices in New York and Australia, did a study that shows that the intensity of internal armed conflict has increased dramatically, with the number of people killed in conflicts globally rising over 3.5 times from 49,000 in 2010 to 180,000 in 2014.

The present population of earth also far exceeds the carrying capacity of a

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sustainable society, and many experts have concurred that our planet has reached a tipping point in terms of its population growth.

A 2011 publication by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) pointed out that human sustainability depends on three determinants, namely the rate of economic growth, the rate of technological progress and the rate of population growth.⁷

The promotion of the green economy addresses two of these determinants – economic growth and technological progress – but since 29

of the 31 countries in the world where women average more than 5 children per woman are in Africa⁸, and since there exists a very clearly established link that illustrates that an increase in human development indicators requires a reduction in fertility rates, African women represent a powerful resource for global transformation.

Population/Age Pyramids of the Developed and Developing World⁹

According to a 2013 Population Reference Bureau report, Sub-Saharan Africa still has a fertility rate of 5.2 children per woman, which does not bode well for our economic and human development prospects, as statistics show that the most developed countries in the world have an average of 1.7 children per woman, and the least developed, 4.5 children per woman. Africa, which is already the poorest region in the world, is driving global population growth and it is estimated that by 2050, Africa's population will have more than doubled from its current population of 1.1 billion to 2.4 billion, with almost one in four of the world's people living in Africa¹⁰.

The additional challenges that face individuals, families and society worldwide include increasing unemployment, hunger and nutritional deficiencies, disease, obesity, lack of education and skills, continuing racism, corruption, waste, climate change, and natural disasters.

The state of South Africa

A 2014 Oxfam report further noted that 20% to 30% of all South Africans were suffering hunger in our supposedly food-secure nation.¹¹ Although our formal unemployment rate stands at 25%, South Africa has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, at around 36.1%.¹²

In addition, the structures of our society do not support the most basic components of social sustainability, namely quality of life, growth and equality at the level of the individual and the family.

A Statistics SA Report released in November 2013, indicated that South Africa's infants, who represented 10% of the population, or 5.3 million

children in 2011, lived in homes characterised by the absence of fathers and a high degree of unemployed adults.

The study showed that only 33% of black children under the age of five years lived with their fathers, that half of all mothers in South Africa were classified as single, and that children raised by single mothers often live in poverty, with 61% of SA's 5.3 million children under five years receiving social grants, which means that they live in households where the primary caretaker has an income of less than R 3300 a month.

A report by the South African Institute of Race Relations, released in April 2011, similarly documented the extent of family breakdown in South Africa and the effect this was having on children and youth.

Urgent interventions are required to turn the tide of unconscious parenting, disengaged fathering, unintended single motherhood, sexism, domestic violence, incest, rape and child abuse. Such a fragmented and "multiply wounded" society cannot survive, thrive or attain resilience in uncertain and challenging times.

Global, continental, regional and national development priorities

The post 2015 sustainable development agenda, including all the local, national, regional, continental, and global development goals, can be summarised in only 5 major categories:¹⁵

- poverty eradication and economic empowerment;
- cradle to grave education, training and skills development;
- health and human security, including reduction of war, crime, domestic violence and violence against women and children;
- partnerships and coordination, leaving no one behind (disability, sexual orientation, sex workers, migrants, rural and grassroots women, youth and children, etc.); and
- environmental sustainability and climate change.

The articulated priorities of

SA women for the National Development Plan

What do women want, and how should South African women coordinate their efforts for the satisfaction of human needs? Given the enormous levels of household poverty, racism, family breakdown and father absence that were the legacies of apartheid design and practice, South African Women in Dialogue (SAWID) has emphasised the need for a national peace, healing, reconciliation and social cohesion programme since its establishment in 2003, as well as towards a psycho-social, family-based strategy to reduce poverty and inequality.

The psyche of a whole nation has remained unhealed, bruised, fragile, quick to take offense, or to be

“The integrity of the family, based on planned pregnancies, conscious parenting, engaged fathering and the professionalisation and remuneration of the unpaid work of women is fundamental to ensuring the emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual health of individuals, families and communities.”

defensive. The human infrastructure agenda in South Africa demands that we take the ragged edges of the open wound that has remained of our divisive colonial and apartheid past and pull them together to be invisibly mended.

The spending of R827 billion between 2013/14 and 2016/2017 on the national infrastructure agenda¹⁶ will not be sustainable unless we attend to the human infrastructure necessary to restore a bruised and brutalised people. This will require a

comprehensive national healing agenda, linked to a poverty eradication approach that massively skills youth to attend to the material and psycho-social needs of individuals and families, ensuring that promised services are delivered, and that human needs are identified and matched with the appropriate resources and services.

In 2011 and 2012 South African women articulated their priorities for the National Development Plan in the SA Women as Champions of Change¹⁷ provincial and national dialogues co-hosted by SA Women in Dialogue (SAWID) and the International Women's Forum of SA (IWFSa), with the support of the Royal Norwegian Embassy.

The priorities of SA women were defined as:

- a psycho-social, family based poverty eradication approach, combined with a productive self-reliance and economic empowerment strategy;
- accessible and affordable early childhood education;
- a strategy to reduce violence against women and children;
- civil society coordination (This includes women's leadership towards creating greater resilience and sustainability in addressing issues of climate change, renewable energy, food security and access to water and sanitation); and
- skills training, job creation and income generation in all of the above.

Co-creative design

"One of the fundamental concepts of this work is that any real, lasting social change that improves the quality of life of ordinary citizens always begins at the local level. Said another way, hierarchies of authority, control and power have almost never been able to develop and complete social programmes to improve the conditions of ordinary citizens. All real social progress usually begins at the local level and is initiated by local citizens."¹⁸

The recent book, *Social Sustainability Handbook for Community Builders*, indicates that social sustainability can only be achieved at the level of families

and communities, and suggests that the strategy that will have the most impact and success is one that seeks to establish co-creative design teams at local levels, (in South Africa at the level of every ward and municipality), where committed groups of 7-9 people can regularly meet to articulate a vision, intention, guiding philosophy, mission statement, objective and goals to collaboratively solve challenges identified and explored by community members themselves.¹⁹ The book suggests validating the vision, intention, guiding philosophy, mission statement, objective and goals against the three core values of social sustainability, (quality of life, growth and equality) and that recommendations from these grassroots groups then be coordinated, and linked to relevant resources and additional expertise and collaborative solutions for their implementation.

In rethinking women's contribution to a rapidly changing world, South African women are well-placed to plot a collaborative and grassroots revolution of women's leadership, articulating a women's charter with a few very clear demands. Women then need to demand funding for the implementation of this transformational women's agenda in a way that is removed from party-political interference and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

Partnerships for sustainability

The three core values for attaining social sustainability in families and communities have been defined as 'quality of life, growth and equality' supported by the three value-emotions of 'empathy, compassion and love.'²⁰ In order for South African women to take the lead in rebuilding our society humanely, we will need to partner with the existing and diverse faith-based organisations in our country that are already closest to families and communities, as well as with women from every single political party to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness.

South African women as planetary managers

- Is it possible that our 'wide and woeful land' is at the same time also

'the most adaptable and amenable nation, socially, politically and economically, that is capable of rapid, positive social evolution, one that could set an example for the rest of the world's democracies'?'²¹

- How can South African women position themselves for planetary leadership during these times of enormous change?
- The single most useful lesson we can learn is that the world is the way it is because we are the way we are. All the current systems in the world reflect the values, attitudes and behaviours of humans. If humans want better and more sustainable human development outcomes, we need to make better and more sustainable decisions.

If our world were to change greatly at one time, what would be the greatest contribution that South African women could make to more sustainable systems of "planetary management"? The idea of rapid changes in planetary fortunes is one that was raised in 2015 by several international scientists during the National Astronomy Meeting in Llandudno in Wales, when they noted that between the years 2030 and 2040, earth can expect the arrival of an intense cold spell similar to the one that raged during the "Little Ice Age", which froze the world during the 17th century and in the beginning of the 18th century, especially between 1645 and 1700.²²

Although these predictions dispute the current "scientific consensus" of climate change experts, global warming scientists and other environmentalists, if the upcoming "Maunder minimum," or prolonged reduction in solar activity predicted by solar scientists, will last for at least thirty years, it could have disastrous implications for food security, human security, livelihood, income and employment.

Humans and the planet share a common destiny. How can individual South African women contribute to 'intentional global-scale management of Earth's biological, chemical and physical processes and cycles...?'²³ What will it take for women to become stewards of the eco-system services that nurture and sustain us, including the climate, freshwater supplies, food,

energy, clean air, soil, seeds, and pollinators?

Conclusion

South Africa has a very important task to accomplish and a very specific role to play in the wellbeing of the whole planet. We represent the most conflictive and extended racial tensions resolved to some extent in a manner that was not only peaceful, but which provided hope for people in situations of conflict in every corner of the world.

Yet the level of compromise necessary for the negotiated settlement in South Africa has stressed the fabric of social cohesion to the utmost. The stresses on the social fabric includes the violence done to human potential where individuals and families continue to live in situations of poverty, deprivation, lack of skills, and unemployment, and the growing economic inequalities perpetuated by a global macro-economic system that is neither inclusive of the unpaid work of women nor reflective of the true value of human labour; the continued experience of racism, and the incredible levels of brutality that continue to characterise our society. This does not bode well for the rainbow dream that we all hoped to participate in.

South African women are again confronted with an opportunity to take a collective and revolutionary position towards the satisfaction of the most basic human needs for belonging and family-connectedness, for healing and social cohesion, for food security and access to clean water, for renewable energy sources, for safety, peace and security, and for productive self-reliance.

This revolutionary stance includes demanding the necessary coordination for the accomplishment of a consensus around a women's and human development agenda, a system to measure it, skilled people to operationalise it and an adequate budget for its implementation.

The struggle against racism and sexism remains one of the most critical challenges facing the people of South Africa. In this struggle, women cutting across party political affiliation,

religious beliefs, sexual orientation, racial and ethnic identities and class, should play a leading role.

South African women have already demanded:

- a national peace, healing, reconciliation and social cohesion programme that reaches every municipality and school;
- a psycho-social, family-based strategy to reduce poverty and inequality;
- accessible and affordable early childhood education for every child;
- A strategy to reduce violence against women and children;
- an electronic framework, added to the existing SALGA Municipal Barometer, to enable coordination between civil society, government and the private sector towards measuring women's and human development and creating greater resilience and sustainability in addressing issues of climate change, renewable energy, food security and access to water and sanitation;
- skills training, job creation and income generation in all of the above, as well as the appointment of paid women community leaders in every ward to oversee the implementation of such a transformational women's agenda; and
- prioritisation and immediate implementation of the Right to Food campaign being spearheaded by the SA Human Rights Commission²⁴, and similar to the Zero Hunger Brazilian strategy²⁵ and of the National Action Plan for South Africa on Women, Peace And Security that is in the process of being consulted and drafted, funded by UN Women, towards the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

What will it take for South African women to take the lead towards achieving massive social evolution during the final four years of the African Decade of Women? Seventeen years ago American futurist Susan Mehrtens wrote two books, *The Leap Frog Option* (1999) and its sequel, *Wake up South Africa*²⁶ (2000) in which she suggested that South Africa was well placed to become a world leader in the future,

due to its position in the southern hemisphere, its industrial base, its motivating past, its independent spirit, a sufficient set of challenges, its high degree of diversity and its small size. The author of the recent book *Social Sustainability Handbook for Community Leaders*²⁷ has similarly suggested that South African women are best positioned to lead the world to more sustainable human development practices based on the minimum values of quality of life, growth and equality.

Let us wake up and demand that funds be made available from government and the private sector to heal the ragged wound that still pains the nation, and to skill young men and women to identify and meet human needs, thus reducing the poverty and inequality that keep the majority of South Africans from participating in

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the much-touted dream of a “rainbow nation”. Empower the women of South Africa to make the African Decade of Women meaningful and effective!

The integrity of the family, based on planned pregnancies, conscious parenting, engaged fathering and the professionalisation and remuneration of the unpaid work of women is fundamental to ensuring the emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual health of individuals, families and communities.

We have been called to action. Let us volunteer for planetary leadership towards greater resilience and social and material sustainability through love, compassion and empathy during uncertain and increasingly unsustainable times... Can South African women afford to wait another 17 years to step forward? ■

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- ²⁵ Food security and food sovereignty were the two commitments made by Brazilian President Luiz Ignácio “Lula” da Silva in his inaugural speech. “If at the end of my mandate all Brazilians eat three meals a day, I will have fulfilled the mission of my life.”
- ²⁶ Sue Mehrtens is president of the Potlatch Group – a research organisation specializing in the analysis of business trends related to global evolution and social change. She has a PhD from Yale University and has worked in a range of Fortune 500 companies.
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